

The Youth Minyan:

A Tribute to Mr. Charlie Serouya A"H

By David Betesh

Let's take a moment to look across the country. What's the one thing that the majority of American synagogues have in common?

There are no kids! You might not believe it, but that doesn't mean it's not true. The younger generation is quickly falling out of practicing religion. The statistics verify that statement, and I see it with my own eyes



Charlie Serouya A"H

at college. One of my Jewish classmates once told me that the last time he walked into the synagogue was his own bar-mitzvah. I was shocked and disappointed to hear that. To add to that, he said that all of his friends are the same way. I asked myself a question. We've all originated from similar traditional immigrants coming to America, why is it that my community is different from his? Why is it that all of my synagogues throughout the community are jam-packed with children (sometimes outnumbering the adults)? Why are there no youth in

the typical American shul?

Besides a yeshiva education, there is one more institution that contributes greatly to having the younger generation staying religious. The youth minyans throughout the community are of paramount importance when it comes to the religious upbringing of an individual. It is important for the following reasons. First of all it is a place where a child can actively practice hazanut and Torah reading skills. Second of all, it is a place where a child can learn about our traditions by watching their family members and friends. Third of all, it is a place where a child can actually get involved and play a role in the synagogue.

There is something special about a child going to the synagogue with his or her father. A child watches what his father does, and then learns by example. It is definitely time well-spent with children, and it can turn into a memorable educational experience.

When someone has an active role in something, he is likely to develop a connection in that something. Most American synagogues have no children because children have no role in the synagogue. Leadership positions and cantorial positions are left to specific experienced individuals, and children have no way or reason to even practice reading skills and participate in any way or form.

Many children see that they have no ability to get involved and therefore the only choice is not to get involved. That child then gets turned away and then ten years later, people wonder why he ends up marrying outside of the religion.

Having a youth minyan allows children to get involved and play lead-

The youth minyan that he helped establish helped the Sephardic community of Brooklyn possess one of the highest youth involvement percentages throughout the Jewish world.

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ership roles and this makes the person feel that his or her attendance to the minyan is needed. As a child, I used to play the role of cutting the tickets for the Youth Minyan at Sephardic Synagogue. Every week I had to submit 450 tickets to the minyan. On a given week, I knew that the entire minyan needed me, and I didn't want to disappoint them by not showing up. Another friend of mine played the role of distributing ice cream and prizes, another gave out the tickets, another read a "mizmor" during the prayers, and another always read the "maftir" in the Torah. All of these people felt like they had an obligation to come to the minyan, and that made them come back. While they are in minyan, they learn new things and practice different parts. Little by little they learn everything. These people, as adults, end up going to minyan because they want to go and not because they were forced to.

The reason why our community is so successful in holding the children in synagogues is because of the youth minyans. The youth minyan has kept hundreds of children in the synagogue and practicing religion. This foresight is why our community is different to that of my classmates. The entire idea of starting a youth program started with Mr. Charlie Serouya A"H, the founding father of the community's first youth minyan.

In the early 1950s, Mr. Serouya established Young Magen David, popularly known as "Charlie's Shul." He worked effortlessly to "keep children off the streets," and make sure that every child gets involved in some way. At any given Shabbat or holiday there were hundreds of children participating in the minyan. Each person played a different role such as being appointed as hazanim (cantors), Torah readers, or committee members. He also had the girls get involved in other ways such as preparing seudot etc. Everybody felt important and felt involved. Although I personally was not involved in "Charlie's

Shul," my grandparents always tell me that I missed out on something amazing. The youth programs today are all modeled after Young Magen David.

Charlie Serouya A"H is one man who left an enormous impression on me. I was lucky enough to know him over the last several summers in the Deal Synagogue. He was always the most powerful figure in that shul. The first time I met him was when I was ten. He kicked me out of the shul for wearing shorts to the minyan. At the time, I was upset, but then I learned my lesson that I must dress properly for the synagogue even if the weather is beyond hot.

Thank G-d, all of the other experiences with Charlie were enjoyable and extremely entertaining. Every morning he would come to the synagogue and pray at the earliest minyan available; usually earlier than 5 o'clock during the summers. He would stay at the head of the breakfast room table until around 9:30 AM. He would greet every person with a cheerful "Good morning young man!" Even if the person was seventy five years old, the person was still considered a "young man."

Charlie used to keep clear records in the breakfast room on who donated what. For example, if I donated the tissue box, it would be written with a calligraphic handwriting on the tissue box, "Donated by Mr. David Betesh." He did the same thing for the orange juice containers, cereal boxes, and the peanut butter jars. He wanted to always make sure that he gave proper recognition to those who made donations in order to further encourage the act of "tsedaka".

Mr. Serouya always used to gather people to help make weekday minyanim happen. Thanks to his efforts, on a given morning, there could be as many as ten minyanim in the synagogue. If he ever saw me walk into the synagogue late, he would make sure not to let me into the minyan that already started, but rather a minyan that was about to start.

There was one moment a few years ago that stuck into my head. It was late during the morning of Tisha b'Av. A group of twenty boys, myself included, came in to the synagogue. Charlie saw that we missed all the minyanim. He didn't want us to pray by ourselves, because then we would be missing out on all the extra "kinot" (sad prayers) of that day. So he gathered all of us in the social hall, and he sat with us and led the services. This is something that only he could have done and would have done. I thought that it was really generous of him to spend his free time to teach us those prayers. At the time, I thought it was unusual, because nobody else would ever be willing to do that, only Charlie.

On a different morning, during breakfast, Charlie saw that all the children were standing because of the lack of seats. He was disturbed by the picture. He got up and moved five adults (who were already done eating) from their seats so that these children can sit and enjoy breakfast. One of the adults screamed out (as a joke) "but I paid twenty dollars this month for this breakfast!" and then Charlie replied "let the children sit down and enjoy; the children come first."

That sums it all. Throughout his life, Charlie really valued children. He understood from the very beginning that they are the future. The youth minyan that he helped establish helped the Sephardic community of Brooklyn possess one of the highest youth involvement percentages throughout the Jewish world. The Youth Minyan movement that he began saved so many from indifference to the religion. Charlie was a very unique man that can't be replaced. He devoted his life to the community in more ways than one. It's no wonder he was honored and given his own pizmon in the pizmonim book (page 313). I personally can't imagine attending the Deal Synagogue and not seeing him. May his memory always be with us. □